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In a recent article, George Steiner¹ emphasized the abundance of Greek myths in our Europe, and at the same time he wondered why there was a paradoxical weakness in the West for creating new myths in recent times; in the midst of this notable scarcity shone the surprising figure of Don Juan as one of the few generated in our era which was not inherited from the Greco-Roman world. The mythological fall of Europe, and by extension the whole of the West, at least since the decline of Marxism, seems to be contradicted by the major edifice of stories that the twentieth century has told: Hollywood movies. It would be a complex process to untangle to what point the cinematographic works that extend throughout several decades have been able to consolidate a mythology in its strongest sense. The phenomenon—as is well known—caught the attention of Edgar Morin in his classic work *Les stars*²: in it the author wondered about the presence of movie star myths in the age of Reason. The idealization and spiritualization of the stars, their conversion into cult objects, and therefore, into the expression of an embryonic religion, or even the supposition of immortality for their bodies, would come into direct contradiction with their undeniable nature as merchandise. This duality was the terrain of interrogation in which Morin situated his reflections. Still, the star constitutes, in our opinion, the backbone of a mythology which definitely does not end with it. Instead, the star blends with the narratives that give shelter to it, and with the mechanisms of editing that build it up, the procedures of illumination that bring out, and hide, its ideal beauty. The star is not—in other words—the mythology, but rather forms part of it; hence, studying it in isolation and unconnected to all

these phenomena would be equivalent to writing the myth once again but with decidedly inexperienced hands for such a divine undertaking.

Now then, even though it constituted only part of it, the movie star was the fundamental axis around which movie mythology pivoted and that began to occur scarcely fifteen years after it was invented. The foundation, deteriorated or not, on which the stars rest incites innumerable metaphors whose precise meaning no one would be able to determine. In effect, all the problems of the great myths are—perhaps sarcastically—reproduced by our phenomenon: the sacred nature of these beings in relation with the common mortal, the very entity—material or not—of those bodies which, not by coincidence, are denominated in an astral sense, their proximity or distance with respect to those who adore them... all this resituates, with a slightly pragmatic spirit, the relation of men and women to the sacred and the profane, the incomprehensible and the material, the accessible and the venerable, the public and the private. In clearer terms, movie myths seem to embody the statute of the myth itself in our unbelieving society dominated by modern communication media.

Yet, to say “movie star,” with that feminine article that magically includes actors and not just actresses,³ supposes a system that produces it and gives it shelter, along with an expectation quickly created in the mass public, a circle of retro-nourishment that spills out from the screen and brings in all the battle fields of mass culture (magazines, the press, photography, memoirs) and brings into play all types of narratives outside of the movie realm (sexual relations, animosities, sudden rises and falls, personal quirks, legends, epics). And here,

once again, incompleteness reappears: if Hesiod or Homer are considered the transmitters, the first codifiers of the world of the Greek gods, then too their distance and the distinctly imaginary nature of the beings they talked about protected them from a bothersome accessibility. Our century has witnessed, in contrast, the more or less ingenious but vulgar tricks with which Hollywood built up its mythic stars, with no distance whatsoever –with the very logical but unmythical desire to get rich. The comparison, no doubt, is a bit extreme but it gives us the measure of themes to convoke the study of the star in this twentieth century of ours. Let us proceed with a bit of order in what follows.

Distance

It was Walter Benjamin who put his finger in the wound on what bestows the work of art with its pseudo-sacred or cult nature: distance. It was he who defined *aura* as a very unique scheme of space and time, the unrepeatable appearance of the far-off, no matter how close it may actually be.⁴ In accordance with this, the irruption of technical advancements would eventually ruin the unrepeatable here and now that expresses the patina of time; because of this, the pictorial work seems far away from us, intangible and deposited in a remote place we call tradition. From this auratic condition sprung the cult of the work of art, whereby art appeared, we could say, as the successor of religion, conserving the remains of the spirit that the latter had abandoned. The cinematographic machine, more than the steam engine or train, because it was a powerful machine of discourse, would have even annihilated what was left of chance that shone forth in photography like a flash of the here and the now that in the photo refused to be absorbed by the present. And this loss was even more accentuated upon a discursive machine driving it out which soon found two intensely temporal tools of development: narration and editing. Yet, contradicting what seems apparent, Theodor

Adorno had already responded on one occasion to Benjamin that the cinema possessed these auratic elements in a very high proportion: “if there is anything that possesses an auratic nature it is cinema, to an extreme and highly suspicious degree.”⁵ The face of the star would condense this magic, cult-forming and distant moment: it denies the accessibility offered in the rest of the narrative. It is an incarnation of the intangible; the body and the face evaporate, stopping the narrative, disregarding the rules of editing, engulfing the spectator in an imaginary identification, whose characteristic would be plenitude.

Two references can serve as an example in respect to what is played out in the face of the actress. Note that both come from diverse eras, attitudes and ideologies. In 1924, Béla Balázs demanded a place in the Olympus for the muse of cinema; as his voucher, he presented the work of Asta Nielsen in *Lulú* by Leopold Jessner: “The true artistic value of Asta Nielsen’s eroticism,” he said, “resides in that it is spiritualized. The eyes above all and not the flesh.”⁶ Balázs spoke of the particular encounter between an actress and a *mise-en-scène*, but the metaphor of spiritualization revealed with fidelity that the artistic condition of the cinema was inseparable from the cult and its object, the face. Many years later, in an exquisite reflection, Roland Barthes evoked the face of Greta Garbo describing it as an “absolute state of flesh that we could neither reach nor abandon,” a mastery of courtly love where “the flesh unleashed mystical feelings of perdition.”⁷ It is a question of idealization, and the flesh appears transcended in benefit of the ideal object. The face was the key to this process.

Let us take note, however, of the fact that the faces being discussed were fixed within a narrative, in a recounted story. We will soon understand that the suspension which, going back to Balázs and Barthes, they imply is in stark contrast with the narrational voracity of cinema, its evocative silence with the progress of the action, and the eternity they suggest with the

measurable time of the projection. We might say that the description appears inauthentic or that it encloses a mystery we could describe thus: these faces seem to have been recreated in an intemporality posterior to the movie projection instead of having been felt at the inexorably fleeting moment of it. There is another, less lyric answer: what inspired Barthes were the studio photos or the stills made into a static photo, especially when this intemporal image would be later seen referring back to the very films as in a boomerang effect so intelligently invented by the industry. This would be sufficient to demonstrate that the star system is not only a product of the films or their fruition; furthermore it is incomprehensible without introducing external factors.

Another fact might well give us the key to the importance of the face. Louis Delluc, one of the most insightful formative theoreticians, defined the essence of cinema as photogeneity, and saw this as a poetic aspect of things and people, which could only be revealed through the new cinematographic art. Photogeneity, wrapped up in ambiguity, and no less suggestive for it, depended—in Delluc's opinion—on movement, light and shadow, objects and on the camera itself. Whatever the manifestation of the concept—once established—may be, can we not read between the lines that the face is the source of the chosen metaphor, the place where the magic and essence of this art is expressed in full? When Boris Eikhenbaum, together with his colleagues from the OPOIAZ, attempts to give a linguistic and scientific basis to the study of cinema, he does not disregard Delluc's term, but rather simply reorients it toward discursive and poetic conditions.⁸ Through figures in language we can better note—Michel Foucault has already showed this in all of his work—the models of a discourse that says more than what its authors know or intend.

Other Realms, Other Approaches

The aforementioned is not the only way of dealing with the phenomenon of the star nor the mythology in which it resides. Sociology, for example, would

emphasize the role of reification of the star, of its transformation into ideology in the Marxist sense of false consciousness. In effect, we well know that stardom is a phenomenon inherent to the consolidation of cinema as an industrial model which aims to offer a cultural product for mass consumption. This is the immediate explanation, from a sociological and historical perspective, for the appearance and success of this phenomenon in the movie industry ever since the actors lost their anonymity as workers for Vitagraph or Pathé and began to take on names recognized by film buffs. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery⁹ propose, following the analysis of the Marxist critic Richard Dyer and his work on the actress Joan Crawford, that the stars are not people but images that emblemize a social imaginary: "Stars do not reflect society in some magical but straightforward way; rather, they embody in their images certain paradoxes or contradictions inherent in the larger social formation."¹⁰ The social space of the star then incorporated the laws of mass consumption. Gorham Kindem¹¹ has examined, for his part, the evolution of the star along with economic, technical and social changes through seventy years, and offers a panoramic vision of different places that it occupies like a symptom, almost like a more dependable indicator for understanding the development of the movie industry in a diachronic sense. Combining this tradition with the sociological importance of the stars in North American culture (and its immediate exportation to the rest of the world) in books like that of Lary May,¹² the image of the stars continues to be contemplated preferably from its repercussions in the social body.

Of course, the enumeration could continue on, but our wish is not to be exhaustive, but rather to merely clarify somewhat the map of approaches. Thus, varying the perspective a bit, we can deduce that the star, with its special charm, becomes fundamentally a center of attraction of collective identifications. The analysis proposed from mass psychology by Siegfried Kracauer is

exemplary in this respect. With the star, as before with kings or military or religious leaders –remember the text by Freud almost contemporary with the consolidation of the phenomenon in the movie industry, his *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (1921)¹³– what was essential was the acting on that traffic of collective feelings toward the unity behind the ideal in order to direct them to economic operativity through mediating and publicity devices. Now then, the complexity of this system could not be exclusively economic, but rather we find ourselves obligated to perceive, in all its vicissitudes, the inevitability of chance. Many of the stars rose in an unexpected manner, while others who had the benefit of a large promotional apparatus and had even been taken under the wing of powerful sponsors in the communication media mysteriously disappeared. In his response, Siegfried Kracauer pointed toward a place beyond the narrational, in the boundary between the public and the private: “Why do some reach stardom and others do not? Evidently, there is something in the star’s walk, face, reactions and speech, which makes him or her deeply connect with the masses of film buffs, to the point where they desire to see him or her, often during a long time. It is logical that the roles of the star are written ‘to size.’ The spell on the public would be inexplicable if it were not understood that the appearance on the screen satisfies the collective desires of the moment, in some way related to the scheme of life that the star represents or suggests.”¹⁴

Thus, the star masked his/her well defined place in the studio’s scheme of production through the exploitation of his/her diva cult. This phenomenon, known previously in the field of theater or opera, reappeared in the cinema with a special nature due to its link with the promotional publicity of an industrial product. In this way, one of the essential boundaries that tends to become distorted in the treatment of the star by the media is that which is established between the public and the private. In effect, the private life, moral and political convictions and the very everyday life of the artist come to be an object of

the public domain through the communication media. The use of the great Hollywood stars to goad on the buying of bonds during World War I was likely the first great show of the social repercussions of the weight of these stellar entities. The dissolution of the private through publicity media was an inherent aspect of this.

An example, both amusing and illustrative and at times dramatic, of this intersection is expressed in the work of the perceptive Marxist critic Juan Piqueras. In spite of his brilliant and combative attitude toward the cinema he did not hesitate to publish articles such as the one dedicated to the divorce of Dolores del Río, in which he sided with the wounded masculinity of a husband who had to bear the greater fame of his wife. Hence, he affirmed in *La Semana Gráfica* in 1928: “Jaime del Río has continued to conserve his Latin personality and beliefs, and has preferred divorce to becoming one more in the ranks of ‘husbands’ who head the lists of Gloria Swanson, Mae Murray and Pola Negri. This gesture, perhaps desperate, has been interpreted by his wife as it should be, since she assures that ‘The Latin man is too much of a man to be the spouse of a star.’ We appreciate the idea that Lolita (Dolores del Río) has of us, but we are of the opinion that rather than complimenting us, she said it to gain two important things: one, to leave her husband in a respectable position with his Latin racial heritage, and another, to make amends –always aware of her “americanized” popularity– to her fellow countrymen from Mexico who, in spite of the revolutionary upsets of that country, might be scandalized by her conduct and take back their admiration of her.”¹⁵ Piqueras’ text reveals the general public’s access to the private life of the star, as well as the social role that the star fulfills, even as a place for the idealization of national or racial characteristics.

Questions Open Up

Up to this point, we have enumerated some of the themes that the study of the star evokes, along with its most frequent focuses. We should now insist

on certain phenomena inherent to cinematographic narration and representation that have been only lightly touched on in these pages. The first is the dissolution of the boundaries that separate character, body, actor and star; or, to reduce it down to a simplifying bipolarity: the realm of narrational fiction and that of reality, of character and actor. These crossroads lead us to recognize the problem of character, in the first place, as a textual product of a given narrative. But we know that it does not end here. Character, especially in the Classical Hollywood model, is justified by a framework that exceeds the realm of its narrative and takes on an intertextual dimension that is projected in a genre or series of narratives and constitutes a given type of industrial production. This intertextual extension is important, among other reasons, for comprehending the consolidation of cinematographic genres and the specialization of stars in the task of “giving body” to standardized narrational formulas. The work of the actor is, in the chain of production, a specialized operation. The figure is designed with a specific profile to be extended throughout a series of films in accordance with the demands of the public. The configuration of genre characteristics, therefore, accompanies the figure in its specialization. In this sense, it is under perpetual scrutiny and apt to be exploited in a given direction in accordance with market norms. From this point of view –in the measure that the star, from a metatextual realm, functions to lend coherency to narrational strategies (in particular those of the genre)– the dissolution of these boundaries becomes an essential characteristic which limits the exclusively narrational interpretation of the Classical cinema character.

Yet upon reflecting on the stars from narrative theory, we should emphasize two new points of interest: firstly, in reference to the narrative construction, and secondly, that which supports, in a

symbiotic manner with the former, an imaginary attraction united to iconographic, plastic effects that are related to the body and its spectacular use. And here, too, the theme exceeds the film and the process of fetishization seems linked to publicity and its commercial use beyond the big screen.

In spite of what we have here expressed, the star system and the star in general are not problems waiting to be solved; perhaps because, in truth, they are not one problem but rather embody many and diverse problems. Firstly, even a distracted gaze would be capable of discerning diverse formulas in the treatment of the faces and bodies of the actresses (and/or actors) throughout the years, not to say diverse types of acting which suggest other forms of interpolating the public. Thus, the technical treatment, the glamour, the uses of gauze, the soft focus, the preference for neutrality or excess in gestures etc., would only be attributes susceptible of being historicized and have had to undergo changes, at the least, with the major film upsets (from vaudeville to narrational cinema, from silent to sound films, from the moderate, rectangular screen to the panoramic formats, from the photochemical to the electronic image, from the big screen to the small...)¹⁶ Secondly, we cannot identify too soon the problem of the star with the Hollywood cinema. Without a doubt the star system found an ideal model in the industrial monopoly of the classical cinema, within which it functioned like just another promotional device. In it, narrative forms, the function of technology and the body of the star came together perfectly. But it is also true that many non-monopolistic film industries, and even other realms in the world of spectacle, have created phenomena with similar characteristics, while continuing to consume the stars *par excellence*, i.e. the American stars (the star system of Weimar’s Germany is too solid to be ignored, nor is that in India examined in this volume by Alberto Elena). Thirdly, if early cinema

put its bets on movie stardom itself, or later on the producer, and the classical cinema consolidated the star system, we must not let the wool be pulled over our eyes: the strategy of the star was pushed aside in the 70s in favor of the director (Hitchcock is the most recognizable case, but after him, others who had not been identified as such in their era were recuperated as "authors": John Ford, Howard Hawks, Fritz Lang and an almost uncountable etcetera) or in other cases the emphasis was on a dubious character without the support of an actor or with indifference toward the person who embodied it (Lassie, Tom and Jerry or Freddy Krueger).

In this sense, the questions that we wish to open up in this monographic volume are complementary, at least in part, to those that guided us in the volume of this same journal whose title was *The Classical Cinema and Us*. Whereas on that occasion we wanted to delve into a few narratives submerged in the past while making explicit the present space from which we were speaking, today we propose a current reflection on the (female or male) star; understanding by that a balance, a look at the origins, consolidation, ramifications, alternatives, decadence and legacy of perhaps the only mythology—somewhat charred, if you will—of our century ○

TRANSLATION: SUSAN HOOVER

1. George Steiner, "La decadencia de los mitos" in *El Mundo*, Saturday, 3rd August, 1994, pp.4-5.

2. Edgar Morin, *Les stars*, Barna, Dopesa, 1972.

3. An unusual case where language seems to invert the privilege of the masculine in an example where both sexes are present. Translator's note: In a group of mixed elements (masculine and feminine) the masculine article is used (los). "Las" typically refers only to feminine elements. In Spanish the word "stars" takes the feminine article and in this unusual case "las estrellas" refers to both male and female stars.

4. W. Benjamin: "Pequeña historia de la fotografía" in *Discursos*

interrumpidos I, Madrid, Taurus, 1982, p. 75 (text de 1931).

5. Letter from Adorno to Benjamin, dated in London 18 March 1936, in Ronald Taylor, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, N.L.B. 1977.

6. Béla Balázs "Asta Nielsen. Cómo ama y cómo envejece" in *El hombre visible*, 1924, included as an appendix to the book by the same author *El Film. Evolución y esencia de un arte nuevo*, Barna, GG, 1978, p.242

7. Roland Barthes: "Le visage de Garbo" in *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957, p. 70.

8. Boris Ekhenbaum: "Problems of the Cinema Stylistics" in Herbert Eagle, ed., *Formalist Film Theory: Poetika Kino*, Michigan Slavic Publications, 1981, pp. 55-80.

9. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery: *Film History. Theory and Practice*. New York, McGraw Hill, 1985, pp. 172 and subsequent.

10. op. cit., p. 185

11. Gorham Kindem: "Hollywood's Movie Star System. A Historical Overview" in Gorham Kindem *The American Movie Industry*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP., 1982, pp. 79-93.

12. Lary May: *Screening Out the Past* Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1980, especially chapters 5 and 6.

13. Sigmund Freud: "Psicología de las masas y análisis del yo" in *Obras completas*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 1981 (4th ed.), vol.III, pp. 2564-2610.

14. Siegfried Kracauer: *Teoría del cine*. Barcelona, Paidós, 1989, p. 136.

15. Juan Piqueras: "Comentarios al divorcio de Dolores del Río" in *La Semana Gráfica* No. 123, 1928. Compiled by Juan Manuel Llopis in *Juan Piqueras: el "Delluc" español*. Valencia, Col. Textos Filmoteca de la Generalitat Valenciana (IVAECM), 1988, pp. 203-205.

16 Of course, it is not our intention to delve into the question of mechanisms, but rather to merely point out some of the major advances the star system was not able to avoid. Naturally, other transformations and conflicts arise from within the star system.



The Stars:
a Myth
in the Age
of Reason

VICENTE SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA & VICENTE J. BENET

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